

Review Essay: *Indigenous Motivations: Recent Acquisitions from the National Museum of the American Indian**

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Introduction

Indigenous Motivations: Recent Acquisitions from the National Museum of the American Indian was a showcase of more than 250 works of traditional clothing and masks, modern textile designs, sculptures, paintings and works of art on paper acquired since 1990 by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI).[1] *Indigenous Motivations* aimed to emphasize the fluidity of American Indian traditions as they have been continuously drawn upon to inform contemporary indigenous practices and productions. Curators Bruce Bernstein, Cynthia L. Chavez and Ann McMullen provided a wide-ranging view of American Indian arts and crafts: the show contained “more than beads and feathers” (West 2006:7). The ‘motivations’ alluded to in the exhibition’s title referred to the multiple sources of inspiration behind contemporary indigenous artists’ work. The exhibition categorized these motivations as stemming from three sources: practices of tradition, innovation and art.

As its subtitle indicates, this was an exhibition curated around objects, rather than around particular tribal or geographic groups. Since 1990, when the Heye Foundation’s Museum of the American Indian became part of the Smithsonian, the museum has acquired some 15,000 objects, including more than 6,200 pieces transferred from the Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection belonging to the Department of the Interior. The exhibition offered viewers access to a panoply of pieces, all made after 1950, ranging from Aymara hats and miniature Kwakwaka’wakw totem poles to Hopi wastebaskets and Navajo textile patterns designed for Sears Roebuck. The juxtaposition of these pieces illustrated the dynamic and adaptable character of American Indian arts, and more broadly, American Indian peoples today. These objects varied in region, tribe, artist, and quality, as well as in purpose (objects made for communities’ use and objects made to be sold to non-natives on different markets), but they were woven together by a common narrative thread: the creative coexistence of innovation and tradition.

The openness of the exhibition design permitted the visitor's movement along any number of potential paths: from case to case, wall-art to sculpture and mixed media objects, jewelry to clothing. In effect, the sequencing of the exhibition experience was left for the visitor to construct. Dividing the long exhibition space into thirds were three freestanding walls covered in a mélange of text and images, each conceptually centered around either tradition, innovation, or art. From just a little time spent with the extensive quotations it was possible to glean the message of this exhibit: tradition is continuously re-invented through innovation, but this refashioning is a long-practiced method of survival to maintain community vitality. As is stated

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on the “Tradition” wall text, “Nothing Stays the Same.”

Tradition

The pieces in the “Tradition” section, the first of the exhibition, were described as “works that resonate with their [the artists] family and community.” These are objects that were created for use in everyday contexts, such as baskets, clothing, hats and moccasins. Here we were introduced to the ways in which *Indigenous Motivations* conceived of ‘tradition’. It is something alive and transformative, and it is an indigenous convention to innovate through cultural and artistic practice:

“The only way tradition can be carried on is to keep inventing new things.”
Robert Davidson (Haida), ca. 1990.

“In order for traditions to remain traditional, they must always change and adapt to present ways. Otherwise, they become part of dead cultures.” Ronald Senungetuk (Inupiaq), 2005.

“Our art and our culture and our language have always been changing. Innovation is the second-oldest form of tradition.” Yaya (Charles Peter Heit) (Gitxsan), 2005.

Throughout this exhibition there were contradictory uses of the word tradition. On the one hand, the plural form, traditions, describes historically and geographically specific practices and productions. On the other, tradition was, to a certain extent, evacuated of this material and historical grounding, and replaced with an evocation of a capacity for dynamism. While this move clearly indicated a rejection of the characterization of native cultures as static or ‘dead’, the emphasis on innovation as the “second-oldest form of tradition” left one wondering what the original form of tradition is or was. The paradox of tradition in current debates over indigeneity emerged clearly in this exhibition: how to erase the derogatory connotations of the term, the condescending residue of grossly imbalanced relationships of power sedimented over time, while at the same time claiming that Native people hold on to their traditions (implying that others do not, or at least not to the same extent?), and that this is an essential aspect of their “native” identity.

Innovation

Taking a left at “Tradition,” led to “Innovation,” which the large dividing wall described as, “more than arts and crafts.” Indeed, the exhibition stressed that these objects, most of which were made for tourist consumption, are not any less “authentic” than other forms of American Indian art. In particular, the exhibition focused on the ways these art objects are located within a complex web of relationships, commercial and otherwise, between Native and non-Native peoples. One especially interesting art form featured in the “Innovation” section was textile design. In the 1950s, Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee, 1916-2002) experimented with graphic and textile design. The patterns that he created were quite popular and set the stage for other Native artists, such as Pop Chalee (Taos Pueblo, 1908-1993) and Al Momaday (Kiowa, 1913-1981), to

produce designs for a line of printed cotton fabrics for Scottsdale Textile Mills. The fabrics were then used to create “southwestern-style clothing and home décor,” which debuted for sale at Sears Roebuck stores in Albuquerque.

A series of miniature totem poles encased in glass constituted the center of the section. One read that a man remembers, in his childhood, stamping these small poles with “Genuine Ottawa Indian Craft.” As indigenous people were able to fashion new traditions, they were at the same time able to maintain community continuity through traditional methods of production and daily survival. These mini totem poles are potent symbols of ingenuity and entrepreneurship—art objects that capitalize on the demand for commodified notions of “Indianness” and culture that reap economic benefits. Totem poles have been produced and reproduced as both sacred and caricatured representations of Native tradition. Engaging—if only superficially—with these inherent contradictions, *Indigenous Motivations* stressed that many of the objects in the exhibit are outcomes of the perpetually expanding marketplace for Indian craft.

Art

The third section of the exhibition, “Art,” included a wide range of pieces ranging from sculptural objects and fine jewelry to assemblage pieces and oil paintings. Many of these works centered on contemporary political and social issues, such as language revival, land claims, substance abuse, and violence. A number of the objects relied on irony and humor, playing with and subverting common tropes of “Indian-ness.” Two pieces by Marcus Amerman (Choctaw) used sly wit and formidable bead-working skills to engage the viewer in social commentary. In *Lucky Blanket* (1998), a felt blanket, a traditional craft item, is embellished with intricate beadwork and made to look like a blackjack table, playing on stereotypical notions of American Indians as casino owners.

This concept of “Art” celebrates the universality of the human creative spirit, both as an individual expression and as a language that can be rooted in one’s cultural heritage. “Art” here is redeeming. The category allows a freedom to take what one chooses from tradition—from that broad notion of “heritage”—and incorporate these elements into new sensibilities. As presented in the exhibition, this concept of art was also conventional however, as it excluded photography, video and installation art, highlighting rather the continuity in ideas about art that have framed our view of American Indian objects for more than a century. As a consequence of educational programs, by the late 1960s there was a marked increase of professionally trained and commercially oriented artists who were adjusting stylistically to the changing trends within mainstream American art. As the post-war generation of American Indian artists grew tired of being asked to demonstrate their “Indianness” or “Indianity,” artists like Oscar Howe and Robert Penn expressed their belief that the artist (rather than their cultural identity) is the only one who should set individual standards for their own artistic and spiritual journey and its expression. Painters of the 1980s and 1990s worked with a selective and personal incorporation of indigenous vision *and* internationalist modernist art styles. Capturing the dual cultural identity of contemporary Native life, artists could choose between new forms of expression in the traditional style, or use modernist, and often abstract, techniques. The complexity of this engagement did not filter through into the ways in which art was defined within the exhibition space.

Media

Within the physical exhibition itself, two distinct voices were heard, that of the Museum itself, expressed in the words of curators Ann McMullen, Bruce Bernstein, Cynthia Chavez and other NMAI staff (who are not marked specifically as indigenous), and the voices of the Native people, which were marked as indigenous by reference to their tribal connections. Voices of the Native artists and people provided a valuable look into the stories of these cultures, which, it was suggested, share similar themes, experiences and beliefs. Compared with a more conventional museum text that describes the time period and location of an object's creation and usage, Native testimony presented was optimistic and personal, allowing visitors to connect on many levels with the messages of the voices present.

The website for the exhibition

(http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/indigenous_motivations/flash8/index.html) takes this form of multivocality into a different space allowing the visitor to navigate even more creatively between themes and objects. In the center of each color-coded frame, curatorial text assigns objects to designated themes and unites cultural productions from throughout the Americas under the overarching themes of cultural resilience and adaptation. On the right of the screen is a list of Native names; clicking on one of these names opens a new text-box with a quotation, its author's name, community of identification, and utterance date. The quotes address a range of ideas, and their presence incorporates these Native activists and artists in the exhibition's authorship, as participants ably equipped to address the political stakes of production and exhibition of Native works. These quotations, authored curatorial statements, tabs pointing to exhibition credits, and bibliography all contribute to an online exhibition that reflexively acknowledges historical museum conventions of both Native and curatorial absence, while forging a new museological paradigm of collaboration and accountability.

The online exhibition extends the museum's reach beyond object-based knowledge production to include digital technology as an innovative platform for public education, increases indigenous participation in museum practice, and expands ideas about "art" and "artist." In this regard, the website's color-coding and its multiple strategies of providing data about objects and their makers offers more in-depth thematic guidance for viewers than was available in the exhibition itself. While it specifies each object's maker and origin community, the website—like the museum exhibition did—implicitly relies on the pan-indigenous mandate of the National Museum of the American Indian, which minimizes the materiality of different (climatic, social, cultural, economic, political, etc) circumstances through which each object was produced in favor of promoting commonalities between indigenous peoples of the Americas. Furthermore, while the website is an excellent addition to the exhibition, there is no attempt to integrate the web presence into the physical exhibition. There were no computers or consoles within the exhibition to allow visitors to access the website, and the website only receives a brief mention in the exhibition's catalogue. Also, though the captions accompanying the website's photographs of the objects in the exhibition provide dimensions, all imaged objects appear of similar size on computer screen, and there is no reliable sense of scale indicating that the piggy banks from various places in South America are significantly smaller than the totem poles of the Northwest Coast. How might this erasure of size differences affect how visitors to either the website or the museum relate to objects as sources of knowledge about their producers or places of origin? In

spite of these limitations, the website is a valuable informational resource—both educative and aesthetically interesting—capitalizing on innovative digital technologies.

In turn, the catalogue provides yet another level of engagement with the collection and exhibition, presenting a collection of thoughtful essays written by both Native and non-Native curators and museum professionals. These contributions elaborate and better articulate the manifold messages of the exhibition. Compensating for a lack of contextualization within the exhibition, several articles address the historical, social and institutional circumstances of the production of Native American art in the twentieth century, including mention of the formative role of Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School in the 1930s and later the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1962. McMullen's article "See America First: Tradition, Innovation, and Indian Country Arts" effectively presents the sometimes problematic but often fecund interactions between Native populations and non-Native tourism in America and Mexico, resulting in the use of new materials and the emergence of new genres of Native arts. McMullen tackles the thorny topics of "authenticity" and the rightful place of "Indian Country arts" in museums as representative of particular historical conditions, power dynamics and inter-cultural exchange. Overall, the catalogue competently situates the objects of the exhibition in their historical and social settings, although more attention could have been given to the creation and operations of the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Board and its role in standardizing an "Indian" label (guaranteeing products were produced by Native American hands) and promoting and developing new markets for Native arts.

Conclusion

The eclectic, yet well-chosen, pieces in *Indigenous Motivations* richly illustrated the myriad inspirations, relationships, and traditions drawn on by indigenous artists today. Yet the manner in which the exhibition classified these "motivations," categorizing them into tradition, innovation, and art, seems problematic. One of the goals of the exhibition seems to have been to destabilize the viewer's assumptions and blur boundaries between identities, authenticities and traditions. So why the need to arrange all the pieces this way, reifying, at least to some degree, what the exhibition otherwise characterized as analytically useless categories? At the same time, the placement of several pieces seemed to be the result of "category errors." Why for example, was a miniature doll by Sioux artist Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty, located in the "Art" section, rather than with the "Innovation" (tourist art) section, which has an entire area devoted to miniatures? Why were several masks, created as a fine art objects, grouped with the pieces in the "Tradition" section? Why was beautifully crafted silver tableware located in "Innovation," while beautifully crafted silver jewelry "filed" under "Art"? Perhaps this slippage between categories was in fact intentional, an effort on the part of the curators to illustrate that the "indigenous motivations" of these artists cannot be neatly shuffled into the kind of classificatory schemes to which the art world has often limited them.

In turn, the majority of these recent arrivals to the NMAI's collection were previously owned by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection belonging to the Department of the Interior. Although the Smithsonian frames its collection as an avant-garde perspective on Native culture, this ancestor already focused on the blurred lines between tradition and modernity in Native-made artifacts. The Arts and Crafts Board already contained objects collected as anthropological

specimens in the 1940s-1960s, as well as paintings and design objects by individual American Indian artists from the 1970s and 1980s. That most of the objects were not museum purchases, nor objects donated by American Indian communities and artists themselves, might also explain the rather narrow concept of contemporary Native art included in the show where the absence of photography and other media such as installation, video, digital, and multimedia art was surprising. This is especially the case given the prominence of these genres in the new museum that the NMAI has recently inaugurated on the Washington Mall where media such as video and installation are a main vector of the museum's curatorial personality. The absence of photography as art was also striking given the generous use of photography in the exhibition's design as documentary evidence of the daily life and practices of Native communities.

The fact that most of the works on display were gifts and donations from private individuals and institutions is not problematic in itself. However, the personality and priorities of these prior collectors and institutions are never explicitly disclosed. Thus, at first, the spectator might have been taken aback by the central importance given to two cases devoted to Andean hats from the 1950s, and to ceramic pigs of all shapes and sizes. By paying attention to the provenance of these objects on the labels, one realizes that they were donations from private individuals, Blanche and Bruce Berman, and Gertrude Litto, respectively. Although the show was titled *Indigenous Motivations*, it is clear that Native peoples' agency was supplemented by outside opinions in the making of the collection.

Despite the exhibition being ostensibly separated by the three themes, the room and the displays themselves suggested an even flow between tradition, art and innovation, showing how all three are able to integrate and influence the others. The objects and methods in the exhibition often blended seamlessly from traditional to contemporary in subject matter, materials and techniques. By allowing the different sections to flow into each other and be separated only by the superficial wall partitions, the constant theme of connection ran strongly through the exhibition, permitting the viewer to walk amidst a living history of Native craftsmanship and artistry. Demonstrating the links between the past, present and future of Native arts, the continuity of time and history were seen through the objects and processes demonstrated in the *Indigenous Motivations* exhibition. Although tradition becomes the praise-song of an overarching indigenous heritage, the works indicated a profound impetus to stay connected to where one comes from in creative ways.

Note

1. The exhibition *Indigenous Motivations* opened at the George Gustav Heye Centre (NMAI) in New York City on July 22, 2006 and continued through mid-summer 2007.

Reference Cited

West Jr., W. Richard

2006 Foreword: Eclectic Abundance. In *Indigenous Motivations: Recent Acquisitions from the National Museum of the American Indian*. Pp. 7-9. New York: NMAI Editions.

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